

# Political and Religious Extremism and Sexual Aggression – New Perspectives from the Workshop on Aggression 2018

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# Political and Religious Extremism and Sexual Aggression – New Perspectives from the Workshop on Aggression 2018

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This focus section on extremism, radicalization, and sexual aggression presents recent research from two currently important fields of aggression research. It presents five papers that were presented at the Workshop on Aggression at the Psychologische Hochschule Berlin in 2018. The first three address risk factors for radicalization and acceptance of group-related aggressive behavior, namely hate speech against Muslims and collective violent behavior towards perceived out-groups including Jews and Ukrainians. The last two studies address sexual aggression: one examines the prevalence and risk factors for sexual victimization among a large student population in Chile; the other considers risk factors for potential sexual aggression in a German sample of participants with and without BDSM identity. The studies span a broad and international perspective on these different types of aggression, including data from Chile, Germany, and Poland and examining the potential influences of social and individual factors. The papers included in the present focus section demonstrate that both radicalization/extremism and sexual aggression are world-wide problems that require preventive action. They provide theoretical input and empirical findings that will hopefully contribute to prevention at the societal and individual levels.

Keywords: extremism, radicalization, hate speech, collective violence, sexual aggression

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Aggression, the intentional infliction of harm on an individual that is motivated to avoid this harm (Baron and Richardson 1994), is a heterogeneous phenomenon with many different manifestations, causes, and consequences (Vazsonyi, Flannery, and DeLisi 2018). Different forms of, changes in, and correlates of aggressive behavior receive growing public and research attention over time, depending for example on social changes and developments, outstanding single events, and/or fluctuating research interests. As a result, aggression research is an ever co-evolving, never outdated field of research that emanates from various disciplines.

Sparked by intense public debate and a growing number of alarming incidents, two aggression-related topics in particular have received intense public attention in recent years. First, various incidents of terrorism motivated by a broad range of political, religious, and sometimes apparently rather idiosyncratic ideologies have not only caused public concern across the world, but also resulted in broad and complex research efforts that aim at understanding, recognizing, and preventing radicalization processes and associated offenses. Prejudices against and discrimination of out-groups—or even the mere acceptance thereof—may not only be a driving force behind such offenses, but also themselves be considered as or related to ag-

gressive behavior (see below). The present focus section, therefore, will first draw attention to various aspects linked to the acceptance of several forms of aggressive behavior towards out-groups and radicalization tendencies.

Second, the #metoo debate has drawn strong attention to the prevalence of sexual aggression not only, but mainly against women. Despite the recent public attention and debate, one of the two studies in the present focus section shows that many of these incidents still go unnoticed, unreported, and consequently unpunished. This indicates that still more knowledge is required in order to effectively prevent victimization through sexual aggression in the first place and to make it easier to report these incidents when they do occur. Therefore, the present focus section will also shed light on several risk factors for victimization from sexual aggression.

The content of the papers in this focus section was originally presented at the Workshop on Aggression at the Psychologische Hochschule Berlin in 2018. The Workshop on Aggression is an international conference that provides researchers with an opportunity for fruitful and friendly exchange about their ongoing aggression research. As such, the Workshop on Aggression covers the whole spectrum of the latest research on different types of aggression. In November 2018, the Workshop on Aggression brought together about one hundred researchers from fifteen countries, including China, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Germany, Ireland, Israel, Japan, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Romania, Spain, Turkey, the United States, and the United Kingdom. The main topic was “Radicalization, Discrimination, and Aggression.” Three keynote lectures by national and international experts covered the three main topics and shed particular light on their interrelations. Andreas Beelmann from the University of Jena, Germany, outlined a comprehensive process model of radicalization including individual factors that may make subjects particularly vulnerable to adverse social experiences such as deprivation, injustice, disadvantages, or discrimination, as well as social factors that may work as acute triggers, such as previous victimization from discrimination (see this focus section for a comprehensive presentation of the model; Beelmann 2020). Paul Gill

from University College London, United Kingdom, gave a thorough overview of the current state of research on radicalization and terrorist attacks and discussed the challenges of research on rare events such as these in great detail (Gill, Horgan, and Deckert 2014; also see Lindekilde, O’Conner and Schuurman 2019). Christia Spears Brown from the University of Kentucky, United States, highlighted the close relationship between discrimination and aggression in her talk on the causes and consequences of victimization from prejudice and discrimination in adolescence. She underlined that discrimination may be considered one form of group-related aggression and outlined how victimization from prejudice and discrimination may serve as a trigger for subsequent aggressive behavior (Spears Brown 2017). Overall, the Workshop on Aggression covered a broad spectrum of different types of aggression and comprised fourteen thematic sessions on radicalization, discrimination and bullying, sexual aggression, general aggression, hate speech, and collective violence, as well as a poster session.

### **1 The Present Focus Section**

This focus section presents five papers that were also presented at the Workshop on Aggression. They address risk factors for the acceptance of different forms of aggression against out-groups, radicalization processes, as well as sexual aggression from a range of different angles. This research is important, because victimization from group-related aggression, terrorist offenses, and sexual aggression may cause severe and long-lasting harm to the affected individuals and significant social costs. In addition, developing effective prevention strategies requires well-founded, empirical knowledge about risk and protective factors for these maladaptive behaviors. Thus, the research presented in this focus section may serve to inform future prevention measures and to lighten the negative impact of experiences of aggression.

In the first paper, Wiktor Soral, James Liu and Michał Bilewicz examine the long-term influence of the consumption of different types of media on the acceptance of hate speech against Muslims and on subsequent Islamoprejudice in a Polish sample over the course of six months. They find that frequent users of social media reported higher levels of per-

ceived normativity and thus acceptance of hate speech against Muslims and Islamoprejudice compared to users of traditional mass media, such as newspapers, radio, and television. In addition, the link between the type of media use and Islamoprejudice is mediated by the perceived normativity and thus acceptance of hate speech against Muslims. These findings are important because they point to the critical influence of online media, including social networks or blogs, in aggravating prejudice.

In the second paper, Mikołaj Winiewski and Dominika Bulska introduce a new multidimensional measure of acceptance of collective violence. They define collective violence as the infliction of harm on members of a group by coordinated actions of at least two perpetrators who consider themselves representatives of another group. The authors present the development of the scale using several large samples from Poland. The final factor structure comprises several subscales, including physical, verbal, and indirect violence against perceived out-groups, as well as isolation, ignoring, and forced assimilation of these groups. Individual acceptance of these subtypes of collective violence differs depending on the targeted out-group (Jews or Ukrainians), indicating that the perception of specific threat purportedly posed by these out-groups is relevant. Thus, the authors provide an explanation of variation in violent behavior towards out-groups and its acceptance.

In the third paper, after thoroughly defining radicalization and extremism, Andreas Beelmann outlines a comprehensive theoretical model that seeks to explain the developmental processes that lead to radicalization. The model integrates and describes a broad range of societal, social, and individual risk and protective factors. In particular, the author outlines four proximal processes that are considered particularly important in promoting radicalization, namely identity problems, prejudices, movement towards political or religious ideologies (that may lead to legitimization or acceptance of the use of violence), and development towards antisocial attitudes or behavior. The model is a valuable starting point for further theoretical discussion and empirical research on radicalization processes.

In the fourth paper, Laura Saldarriaga, Carolina Rocha, Diego Castro, Gloria Jiménez-Moya, Héctor Carvacho, and Gerd Bohner report sexual violence victimization rates in a large sample of Chilean undergraduate university students. They contribute to answering the pending question on the reasons for large differences in prevalence rates of male sexual victimization in various studies using Chilean samples and identify important methodological differences. Apart from gender, a higher number of sexual partners as well as a short-term mating orientation are linked to sexual violence victimization in regression analyses, whereas a range of attitudinal factors of the victims is not. Thus, the study's findings highlight the need for replication studies and research on the topic in different countries.

In the final paper, Rebecca Bondü and Joseph Birke shift the focus to other risk factors for potential sexually aggressive behavior in a group of participants who consider themselves sadists, masochists, or both. The authors provide evidence for three subscales of aggressive sexual fantasies among the participants with BDSM identities, which are similar but not identical to those found in the general population. Importantly, aggressive sexual fantasies predicted presumably non-consensual aggressive behavior beyond other risk factors irrespective of whether participants reported a BDSM-related identity or not. Thus, the study points to the potential relevance of aggressive sexual fantasies for aggressive sexual behavior by providing first evidence that links between the two may even hold among individuals who consider the consensual infliction of pain or humiliation on the sexual partner as a part of their sexuality.

## 2 Outlook

The papers presented in this focus section show that aggressive behavior may be reflected on from different scientific angles and that individual and social risk factors as well as their interactions may work to predict its perpetration. Bringing together studies focusing on radicalization processes, on acceptance of group-related aggression, and on sexual aggression also underlines the need to tackle different forms of aggressive behavior worldwide and to consider quite diverse risk factors depending on the specific behavior

in question. In order to develop and implement adequate and effective prevention measures, further empirical research on the risk and protective factors for these forms of aggression are required, as well as evaluation studies on prevention initiatives designed to diminish the prevalence of and harm caused by aggressive behavior on individuals and society.

Because aggressive behavior has multiple facets associated with different risk factors and consequences, and because the phenomenology of aggression is constantly changing over time, up-to-date research is always needed. By way of example, research on risk factors for terrorist attacks during recent years mainly concentrated on jihadist offenders. Recently, however, a growing number of mass-casualty offenses by perpetrators with politically far-right motives across the world have caused increasing concern and highlight the need for more detailed research into these offenders as well (for example Bouhana, Corner, Gill, and Schuurman 2018). This research may show whether the same dynamics apply to all radicalization processes and/or whether there are different risk factors and warning signs for perpetrators with motives emerging from different political and religious ideologies.

The present findings also point to the need to consider potential cultural differences. By way of example, research from the United States indicated that living on campus may be a risk factor for victimization from sexual assault (Muehlenhard, Peterson, Humphreys, and Jozkowski 2017). In contrast, the present study by Saldarriaga and colleagues finds that only a small percentage of reported incidents of sexual violence were committed on campus, indicating that living on campus may not have the same meaning or relevance in this cultural context. Consequently, research in one country does not make research in other countries redundant, even if similar research questions are examined.

These thoughts highlight the importance of regular opportunities for scientific exchange between aggression researchers. Scholars throughout the world should seek and use the opportunity to collaborate in order to create reliable and comparable research results and to expand our knowledge. The Workshop on

Aggression will continue to provide such opportunities.

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